

Finding Sally

by Robert B. Slocum

The day Sally died was the day John sold the furniture. All of it.

That early morning he had been holding her hand in the ICU. She couldn't talk, but her eyes were in his eyes as he leaned over the bed rail. He could always feel her energy inside him, and that day was no different. He slipped his index finger to the center of her palm and moved it firmly back and forth. It had been their signal for years. "I want you," he was saying with his finger, and the light twinkled in her eyes for a moment before fading. Then she was mostly still, and her eyes closed. He touched her chest with his index finger to say "I love you." He smiled, but his lips were pressed tightly together. He was sweating.

Sally had been in and out of consciousness since the previous night. John was right there. The bad dream wouldn't stop. At one point he realized there was a mild flurry of activity around him, even though the instructions were to let her go. Then they left him alone. She was gone. The face, the hands, the hair, the curve of the shoulders, the soft breasts—they were all hers, but somehow not anymore. He was alone. He couldn't feel Sally. He couldn't feel her.

So he got to work. He had a list.

The mortician wore a heavy dark suit with a silver rotary club pin in the lapel. It had a diamond in the center. His hair was combed back over his head, and looked wet. "Would you like to talk to our grief counselor?" he asked. "No," John said firmly, "I really don't want to talk to anybody. Let's get this over with." With restrained pride, the mortician began to display his most elegant coffins. "No, no, no," John said. "She wouldn't have wanted any of that. Don't you have something simple?" They settled on a basic pine box. The mortician was visibly annoyed. John was standing outside on the steps within half an hour of his arrival.

The church took longer. He went to St. Anthony's, which was Sally's home parish. There was bustling activity when he entered the parish office. Phones were ringing. The parish secretary was putting someone on hold to answer another line. The priest, dressed in a stylish suit with a black clergy shirt, appeared briefly outside his office, and then went inside and closed the door. "Father's in his weekly staff meeting, before he meets with the altar guild, and then today he's on to the diocesan office," the secretary was explaining to the caller on the phone, "but I can get you in next Tuesday at 4:15."

John took a seat in the waiting area of the office. He flipped through the pages of the diocesan newspaper, looking casually at the photographs. There were pictures of

smiling children at the diocesan summer camp. It reminded him of summer vacation times and weekends with Sally at the lake cottage. She looked good in a swimsuit, and better when she took it off. He turned the page, too fast. He folded the paper and put it back on a table.

"You're welcome to wait here for Father." That's what the secretary said to him, but with some hesitation. An hour later John was still waiting. Finally the priest's door swung open, and John let himself in. The priest blinked with surprise. John sat across the desk from him, looking him straight in the eyes. The priest glanced away, briefly. John didn't move. "Sally is dead." It had been a couple of weeks since the priest had brought her Communion, and she was still talkative when he last saw her. He seemed not to know what to say.

John continued without a pause, "Sally and I talked about all this before. Here's what she wanted," he said, unfolding a small sheet of paper from his pocket. "Would this Saturday afternoon at three be possible?" The priest paused for a second, checked his monthly planner, and said yes. John rose to go, but the priest leaned forward in his chair, raising his hand. "Don't you want to talk about this?" John smiled quietly, shook the priest's outstretched hand, and left the room. "Father," he said, "I know you have a busy day."

The church did not take much more time than John's visit with his boss. John waited while his boss thumbed through the report on his desk. As he raised his eyes, John said, "Sally's dead. I need some time off." His boss seemed to be making quick calculations in his head, before saying, "Okay. Is a month long enough? McManus can cover your accounts and clients for that long. Anything else we can do for you?" he asked, looking to make eye contact with his best sales rep. John thanked him quietly, handed him some files from recent projects, and left.

Then John went home. That's when he took care of the furniture. The bed where they slept together. The table where they ate meals. Her rocking chair with the cushion where she loved to curl up and read. It all went. He called the Bluegrass Auction Specialist, and the truck arrived that afternoon. The movers looked at him quizzically, but they kept going until everything was gone. Everything. He slept that night on layers of blankets and sheets that he spread on the soft pile carpet.

John lived that way until after the funeral. That night his bags were packed before he went to bed. The next morning he was on the road. As he approached the interstate cloverleaf, he wasn't sure which direction to take. He didn't know where he was going. Everything was gone. Sally was gone. He couldn't feel her. Their home was gone. His life was gone. He was looking for something. He was looking for her. If he wanted, he could return in a month to what was left. Or he could keep going.

John turned onto the ramp for the eastbound lanes of the interstate. He signaled carefully, and merged into the outbound lane. He was on his way. The sun was just rising, and the clouds on the horizon were filled with an orange glow. It was a new morning.

John spent his first night on the road in a motel. He slipped the key card through the door slot, and entered the dark room. It had a king-sized bed, with two chocolates on the pillow. He winced slightly, remembering times when he had taken Sally to spend the night in motels. They had ended up in one on their first date. He remembered it all. They went inside, holding each other, kissing, fumbling with their clothes. Laughing, he asked her, urgently, "can you hurry up?" as she pulled at the belt around her waist. The bed groaned slightly as they came together. It was hours before they slept. Their breakfast was waiting outside the door on the next morning. They didn't leave the room for two days.

Tonight John was by himself in a very large bed. He turned off the TV with the remote, not fifteen minutes after he began idly looking for something. He glanced out the window, past the decorative curtains, to find a view of the motel parking lot in back. He could see his car. The room was very quiet when he turned out the light. At first he tried holding the extra pillow close to himself, but he felt silly and strange. He tossed it to the other side of the bed. His mind was racing as he waited motionless in the dark. It was hours before he would actually sleep.

On his way out of town the next morning, John passed a church. It had a sign in front: "Come In and Pray." The sign was white, with script letters. He took its advice. Inside, the chapel had a clean, well-scrubbed look. A single candle was flickering beside the cross on the altar. John walked past a table with various pamphlets and cards on it, and he sat in a pew near the altar. He was alone. At first he said the Lord's Prayer, which he knew by heart. He tried praying without words, but he soon found himself looking around. He noticed a place in the corner that the cleaner had missed. His eyes darted to the window, the altar, the pew in front of him.

Finally John relaxed, remembering Sally and the way they sat close together in church. Sometimes she would actually rest her hand on the top of his leg, or the back of his hand. He would realize he wasn't thinking about the sermon. Finally he was still, listening inside himself as he sat in the semi-darkness of the small room. It was very quiet. After several minutes, he became restless and began to fidget again. As he left, he dropped a few dollars in a collection box near the door.

Sally loved diners. And if the diner had stools and a Formica counter and its own milkshake machine, so much the better. They joked about eating their way through every diner in Kentucky. As John drove he passed "Annie's OK Diner." It was about lunch time, and he decided to stop. He sat at the counter and smoothed the paper napkin on his thigh as he waited for his order to come. The waitress brought his tuna sandwich and a bowl of chicken noodle soup. John crumbled a saltine cracker into the soup, and stirred it idly with his spoon. The broth was fairly clear, but he couldn't see the bottom of the bowl. Cracker crumbs floated in shards.

The soup was hot enough to make his lip tingle. In a very different way, his lips would tingle when he and Sally kissed for a long time. He felt it all over his body, but his lips wouldn't be the same for hours. Somehow the sensation lingered. He didn't understand. John left his half-eaten sandwich and the unfinished soup on the counter. He paid at the cash register and hurried for the door.

In a few days, John found himself in Lexington and wandering through the empty university campus where Sally went to school. He realized he was haunting the old spots, lingering in the places they had known. He felt like a ghost looking for a ghost. John stood outside her apartment where they had often been together. He smiled when he remembered the time they were in bed and completely spent. He was sweating, but relaxed. John's body was still as he sprawled next to her on the bed. Maybe Sally thought he had collapsed. "Are you all right?" she asked him, with genuine concern in her voice. He was all right.

Sally's best friend still lived in Lexington, not too far from the campus. He walked over to her place after calling. At first she was surprised to hear from John, but she quickly invited him over to talk. In a matter of minutes, he was sitting at Deb's breakfast room table with a cup of coffee and a collection of pictures in front of him. They talked for a while, mostly about Sally. Deb was remembering the way Sally would fidget in bed after she went to sleep. Things only a roommate would know.

John knew. It made him remember how happy he felt when he held Sally in bed. Sometimes he didn't even want to sleep. He would resist sleep, because he wanted

to feel her next to him. He could hear Sally breathing. He put his arms around her, holding her, making her safe. He wanted to protect her from any danger, anything that might happen in the world after she got out of bed the next morning. John held her that way even more when she got sick. Sally would quickly drop off to sleep, and he would just be holding her. Sometimes she would talk in her sleep. One time she just said “Wow!” He smiled and held her closer to him. But he couldn’t protect her.

John realized he wasn’t following what Deb was saying. He was still thinking about holding Sally in bed. Deb was talking about her major at the university, and he wasn’t sure how the conversation had gotten there. Later they looked through the old pictures. There was Sally on a trip with Deb at spring break, Sally in silly clothes at Halloween, Sally with an old boyfriend (he winced a little), Sally with a serious look on her face while talking on the phone in pajamas, Sally sitting on the steps of her dorm in a floppy blue sweatshirt. “John,” Deb asked, “would you like to have some of these?” He almost said no, but he couldn’t. He left Deb’s house with half a dozen pictures of Sally in a folder under his arm.

On the campus John saw a bench where he used to sit with Sally. Sometimes they would be together there as the sun went down and the evening air began to cool. He sat for a while, looking back through the pictures one more time. He loved to see her smile.

Then it was time to go home.

Even though John had been gone for less than a week, the house had a musty smell. He brought in a stack of mail and papers that he found outside, and dumped it at the end of the new table. He sat down. The house was quiet. If he had hoped to find Sally on his trip, he hadn’t really. She wasn’t anywhere he went, and he was still alone. He couldn’t touch Sally; he couldn’t see her. A tear rolled down John’s cheek, and he knew. He felt her now.